

Alarming upward trend in Black youth suicide from 2003 to 2017

September 9 2021



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In the United States, the rates of suicide and suicidal behavior among youth, children and adolescents 5-17 years of age, have been steadily increasing over the last decade, and Black youth, 5-12 years, are

approximately two times more likely to die by suicide than their White counterparts. However, the literature investigating Black youth suicide is extremely limited.

For the first time, researchers have examined the trends and precipitating circumstances of [suicide](#) in Black youth only by age group and sex.

"Because of the concerning trends seen in the recent literature on Black youth suicide and suicidal behavior, we wanted to look specifically within [black youth](#) only to get a clear understanding of what is happening within this population," says lead author of the study Arielle Sheftall, Ph.D., who is a principal investigator in the Center for Suicide Prevention and Research and the Abigail Wexner Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital.

The study, which was published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, aimed to identify specific risk factors and developmental mechanisms associated with Black youth suicide that could serve as targets in suicide prevention programming.

Using data from two national databases, the team demonstrated that between 2003 and 2017, Black youth experienced a significant upward trend in suicide, with the largest annual percentage change among adolescents between 15 and 17 years of age, at 4.9%, and among girls, at 6.6%.

"We found that the annual percent increase among Black girls was twice that of Black boys, which was very surprising because this finding goes against what we usually see in the literature wherein more males die by suicide than females," explains Dr. Sheftall. "This is quite concerning and signals that something is happening among our Black girls."

Several clinical characteristics and precipitating circumstances varied by sex and age group. For example, Black girls were more likely to experience a boyfriend/girlfriend crisis prior to death and died by suicide within 24 hours of an argument compared with Black boys. Whereas, Black boys were more likely to experience a recent criminal/legal problem and less likely to have received mental health treatment prior to suicide compared with Black girls. Younger children, especially those 5-11 years of age, were more likely than older decedents to have experienced family problems/crises and school problems and if diagnosed with a mental health concern, more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

"When implementing suicide prevention with Black youth, you have to start from ground zero. You have to figure out what the risk factors are for Black youth and then evaluate which [prevention programs](#) are beneficial or if adaptation of the prevention programs are needed," explains Dr. Sheftall. "We propose getting the community involved and bringing [suicide prevention](#) to [youth](#) via the church, community centers, summer programs, and other settings that bring people together and have always been staples in the Black community."

More information: Arielle H. Sheftall et al, Black Youth Suicide: Investigation of Current Trends and Precipitating Circumstances, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2021.08.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2021.08.021)

Provided by Nationwide Children's Hospital

Citation: Alarming upward trend in Black youth suicide from 2003 to 2017 (2021, September 9) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-09-alarming-upward-trend-black-youth.html>

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